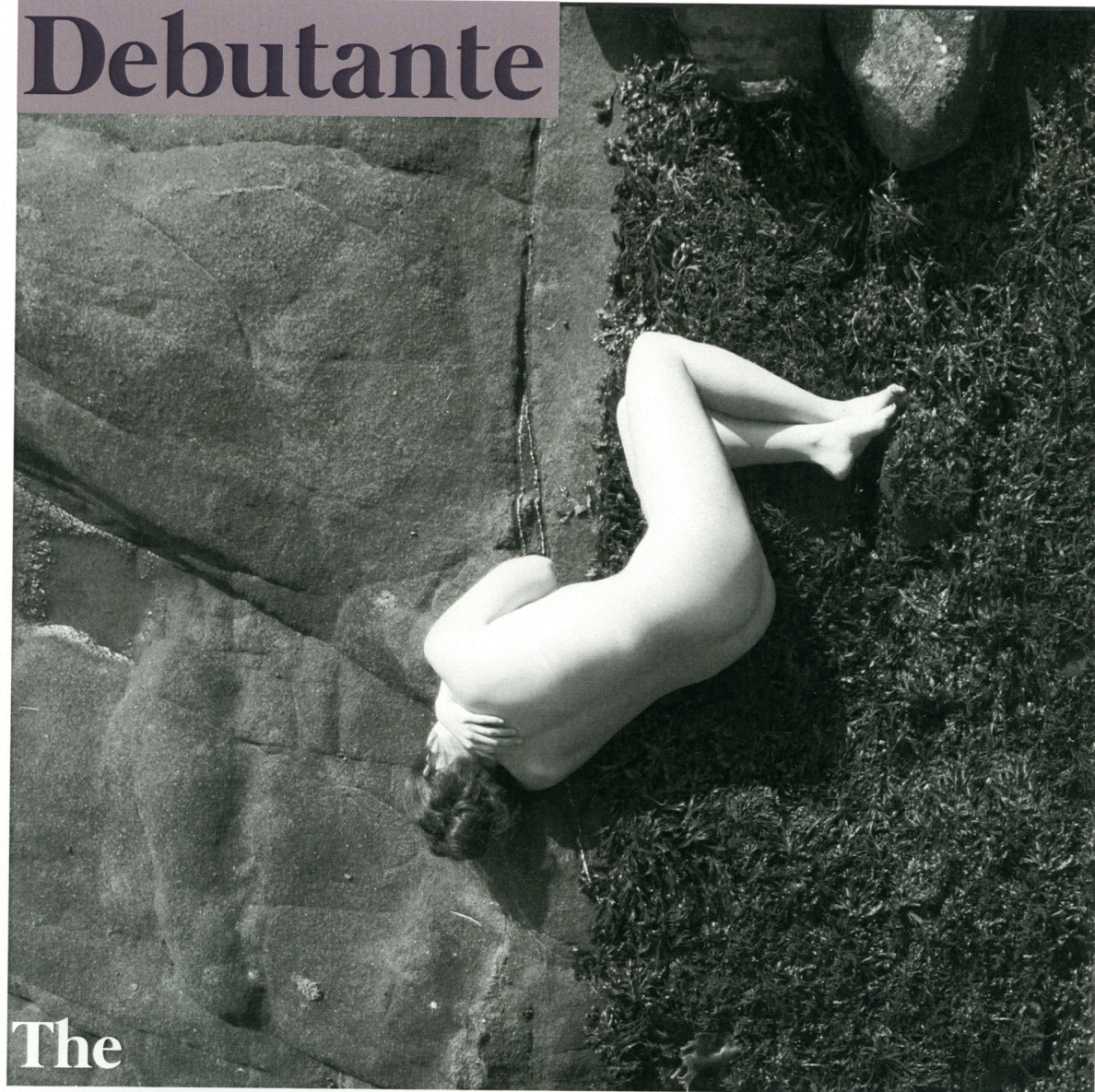


The Debutante

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The Feminist-Surrealist Manifesto



A radical, collage-like approach to the journal, featuring:

A guide to surviving Brexit with Leonora Carrington
Penny Slinger's hitherto unpublished poetry
Preview interview with the guest curator of '31 Women'

January 2020

Front cover image: ©Audrey Yeo.
Back cover collage: ©Penny Slinger.

"I am using myself as my muse":

Our totally frank interview with icon Penny Slinger.

3) Feminist-Surrealists collaborate.

They are not possessive of feminist-surrealism, they introduce new people to the movement, and teach them its principles. They take refuge in feminist-surrealism and combat the patriarchy together. (Remember that other women are not your natural opponents; it's the patriarchy that forces us into spiteful competition).



Left: 'Owl Mask' (1971).

What attracted you to surrealism?

From a young age I had always played with collage, but it was discovering the collage books of Max Ernst while I was a student at Chelsea College of Art that really turned me on to both collage and surrealism. The way he took old engravings and put them together to create worlds of fantasy and mystery that excited me so much. It turned the world of appearance on its head.

I was never that interested in pure representation, I liked the idea of revealing something of the inner workings of the psyche, the world of dreams and imagination, that called to me. I was interested in the mythic and iconic, and the language of surrealism seemed to embody that most fully in the world of contemporary art.

It showed, by example, that there were no rules one had to follow except the inclinations of the imagination and, by an large, it took pieces of the 'real world' to do that, reassembling them at will into a new, alternate reality.

That is what drew me most to surrealism. I guess if I was content with the mundane world of appearances, I may have picked another style or movement, but I was always marching to the beat of my own drum and, as a non-conformist, surrealist language fitted my revolutionary approach to life and art.

How does a surrealist framework support a feminist intent?

Being not content with the world of appearance and surfaces, the surrealist framework was perfect for delving into the subconscious realm and digging up the hidden truths that lie within. I felt it was high time for woman not to be seen as an object (in the world of art and in life in general), but to show the inner workings of a woman's mind and psyche was for me crucial and deeply relevant. Surrealism offered the toolkit to probe and uncover, unfetter... So I seized it readily for my own agenda of undressing the female nude to see what lay beneath the skin. I never felt feminism was about getting the same powers as men, but about having the power of the feminine recognised.

Do you identify as a feminist-surrealist?

I do. But then I also have evolved the surrealist perspective to include the transmissions of Tantra. When I discovered Tantra, I felt it to be the evolution of surrealism, as it incorporated the superconscious realms as well as the subconscious. So my style of surrealism is a collage of these approaches. I also have a lot in common with Frida Kahlo who said she was not really a surrealist as such because her work was about herself. We both have used the language of the surrealists to look deeply within. I personally think that is the ultimate surrealist purpose.



Left: 'Feather Mask' (1971).

How do you reconcile the patriarchal structures of canonical surrealism with your feminism?

My work is by its very nature the challenge in itself. I decided to be my own muse and to show the nature of the feminine through my own eyes, not through the lens of the masculine gaze. I know that has challenged not only the patriarchal in surrealism, but in many walks of life. I placed myself deliberately in the erotic arena to try and shift that paradigm. I know I ruffled feathers.

Victor Lyons, then running the Playboy Club in London, came to my 'Opening' exhibit in 1973. As he was leaving, I asked him for his reactions. He simply said, "I like my pornography straight". I was obviously making it very crooked! It made him very uneasy, so I reckon I was doing my job.

How do the legacies of women surrealists from the modernist period feed into your work?

I have to be totally frank and say that I was not that impressed by the women surrealists of the period. They were overshadowed for me by the power of the male surrealists, Max Ernst in particular. I have come back to look at their work as I have matured and have appreciated them, but at the time I was not really influenced by them. Their contributions seemed like a rather watered down version of what the men were doing. I also felt that they were not really showing an aspect of surrealism that was especially tuned to the female consciousness and view in a powerful and focused fashion that left a space for me to come in and use the surrealist tools for this purpose in a way I had not yet seen.

I remember being impressed by the strong beauty of Lee Miller, but in her role as muse to Man Ray! Later, I became familiar with all her photography and gained a deep respect for her work. I knew her personally through my connection to Roland Penrose and spent many weekends at Farley Farm with them both.

So I guess at the time I played into the chauvinism of the art world, but then I have never felt it was enough to be a woman artist to shift the paradigm, one has to create exceptional art.

What would you say to someone who believes surrealism is a thing of the past?

The actual surrealist movement is of course a thing of the past. I used to feel sad that I had missed the heyday and was not able to participate in the kind of interactions with fellow surrealists that I would have so enjoyed. But as time has gone on, I realised I have my own approach which, as I mentioned in the previous question, has evolved into my own personal style. If anything has real value, it lasts and evolves. So with surrealism, I discovered it as I sought throughout the history of art for what resonated. I always look for not only that which is timely, but that which is timeless.

"I have to be totally frank and say that I was not that impressed by the women surrealists of the period."



'Bear Mask worn by Penny' (1971).

How are you practicing now? How should feminists work to integrate surrealism into the contemporary everyday?

"I am attempting to smash through this barrier of agism, which is in force particularly for the female of the species. It is the next bastion for feminism."

Once we are no longer sexual magnets, it is harder to have the allure that younger women have.

But this is all caught up with the patriarchal approach and the cannons which see beauty as skin deep, I have never bought into that. My beauty has deepened within as I have aged and I have matured, like a fine wine. So I am currently using myself as my muse, at age 71, and boldly claiming that right. It is not easy, but then I never took the easy path or the road most travelled.

I have to fight my own perceptions too that want to look in the mirror and see my archetypal image staring back...Age has ravaged that beauty, but my years have also enriched my being and I know I have real value and the wisdom of experience to share. I have always been myself, but now I have more of an overview of how all the threads weave together in this tapestry of my life on earth. My latest series is entitled 'My Body' and I am using myself as the container of my body of experience, in its various facets. I am not ready to be made irrelevant.

Thank you Penny, for your time, support and solidarity.

Female Verse

By Penny Slinger

I like poetry
Because it is a way
Of using words like images
Of painting pictures
Cutting and pasting
Impressions
In verbal collage
Free from conventions
Of rational thought
Of logical sequence
Basking in the blazing verse
Of pure perception
Passionate connection
And the dada of language
Tottering on the edge of reason
Like clothes
Hanging out to dry
In the wind tunnels of change
The hunger games
Of violent opportunity
Ravage the words
And reform them
Scattered confetti
Becoming Giacomettis
On the cutting edge of vacant mind.
I like poetry
Because it is the language
Of the surreal
And the song of the psyche
Sings through it
Like a lost refrain
Re-membering
The fractured body
Of the female brain.



'20th Century Reconstruction of the Venus D'Imago', photo collage from 50% *The Visible Woman* (1969). © Penny Slinger.